



United States Mission to the OSCE

Reply to Ambassador Markus Mueller, Head of Center, Bishkek

As delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative Douglas Davidson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 11, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I should like to begin this afternoon by warmly welcoming Ambassador Mueller to this, his first appearance before the Permanent Council, and at the same time by thanking him for his comprehensive report.

In reading this report, we saw the unmistakable signs of a country whose citizens are determined to continue along the path toward democracy, and a government committed to rectifying the shortcomings of February's flawed constitutional referendum.

While there are still issues of concern about government interference, we are pleased to see that these issues are increasingly being discussed, debated, and referred for expert opinion. This is a clear sign that Kyrgyz democracy is maturing.

Although sometimes still subject to government pressure, the political opposition, civil society and the public at large are voicing their concerns about policy, proposed policy, and government actions. Increasingly, government is responding to these concerns, as evidenced by its decisions to postpone parliamentary proceedings on the controversial draft political parties law, and to reconsider the new law requiring cash registers at all trade outlets, including bazaars.

All of this shows democracy in action, and this is good news. Society is better informed and is expressing its views, and government is reacting, which is the bedrock of good governance. This exchange does not mean, in Kyrgyzstan or anywhere else, that all sides will be happy, but it does demonstrate the importance of access to information and public debate. Open discussion among all stakeholders will lead to better acceptance of policy decisions and ultimately, to political stability.

An active civil society and growing government responsiveness will make it easier for Kyrgyzstan to address more difficult problems. Media freedom and conduct of elections will be proving grounds in the very near future, and pose an opportunity for Kyrgyzstan to once again demonstrate its commitment to OSCE standards of democracy and human rights.

With important elections coming up, it will be imperative to have a free and independent media join fully in the debate. The media must also be free to comment on the conduct of the elections, including the campaign period, voting and the tabulation of results. Kyrgyz authorities must resist the temptation to find administrative technicalities to close down the opposition press.

Civil society and the media can be powerful allies as Kyrgyzstan intensifies its efforts to promote

good governance and to combat corruption. Pervasive corruption can seriously undermine democracy. In addition to adopting a "zero tolerance" attitude toward corruption, Kyrgyzstan must address the structural problems that lead teachers, healthcare workers and civil servants to supplement their salaries through petty corruption and bribery.

Pay for grade schemes that are pervasive in Kyrgyzstan are doing a serious disservice to Kyrgyz students today, and will hurt Kyrgyzstan well into the future. These schemes render diplomas meaningless. Kyrgyz university degrees will close more doors for students than they open, as long as it is possible to obtain them without attending classes or passing exams. This is not the type of human capital development that will help Kyrgyzstan take full advantage of the benefits of market economy, globalization and economic integration.

Mr. Chairman, in so many respects, Kyrgyzstan is once again on the right path towards its goal of democracy and market economy. In the coming year, we urge the Center in Bishkek, and the Kyrgyz authorities to build on their already good relationship to find ways to address the remaining obstacles to Kyrgyzstan's complete democratic transformation.

I thank you.